concepts of reflection and evaluation. We would all do well to assess our political work more and consider our goals, our progress and our success.

This model is a work in progress. We believe it is useful and a valuable contribution to our community. Like any abstract model or process, it will not work equally well in all situations. It is a somewhat cumbersome, formal and lengthy - requiring a facilitator, adequate time for each stage of the process and a somewhat sophisticated familiarity with the process. The structure and formality is good in some cases - it maintains a civil and positive atmosphere that prevents personal attack and conflict. This process is also based on a two-party structure, so it does not work as well for a collective of people who are all involved in the activity being critiqued and will also all be involved in the critique of it. This model is not suited for a situation in which the people doing the work being critiqued are not interested in hearing the critique, nor does it necessarily work for deeper, fundamental critiques of strategy or ideology or 'political line.'

So whatever situation you find yourself in, you may make pieces of this existing model work for you, or you may simply need to create your own process, much as we did in our class. Take heart though, that it can - and should — be done. Certainly the need for political critique exists, to improve our politics and to increase the trust between us all in our activist and community endeavors. Perhaps the most important way to improve this model is for everyone to be more familiar with the process, as well as the purpose, of giving good, constructive, supportive political critique.

The Matchbook Learning Project has tried to begin that process in a conscious and structured way. We hope to see this process continue, and we will do everything we can to encourage it. Stay in touch with us.

We plan to have more classes on political critique and related subjects in the future. If there is enthusiasm, we could help organize smaller workshops or presentations on the subject, or to some extent, serve as a clearing house for discussion and development of better political critique. The main thing though, is for people throughout our community to take this and run with it.

And in the spirit of inspiring political critique, let us know what you think...

The Matchbook Learning Project
matchbook@123mail OR
P.O. Box 4934, Berkeley CA 94704

Anarchist Critique: Less Shit-talking, More Foresight
Critical Response Process

We, as anarchists, are a community that is engaged in political struggle and in building a new way of life. The work that we have done makes us proud to be part of that community and keeps us together. In this pamphlet we are presenting a model whose purpose is to enable us to better analyze and critique our own work and that of others. Our hope is that use of this model will heighten the level of critique present in our scene.

Much of the critique on the left assumes that there is a right (and wrong) way to create social change. Once that way is found and everyone follows it, we will be on our way to revolution or mass social change. Though greatly simplified here, this outlook does seem to be quite common. This model challenges this notion in that the responders (people giving feedback) are not there to show the presenter (people receiving feedback) how to do it right, but to learn from the process together as peers. Essentially the assumption becomes that there are many ways to do our work and we can help and learn from one another, as long as respect is present.

This model gives a lot of power into the hands of the presenter. This power can of course be abused, particularly if the presenter doesn't work within the underlying assumptions presented within the pamphlet. This level of control, however, could make it more likely that folks are willing to enter into the process. Particularly if the presenters don't feel on an equal footing with the responders, this model can be used to help equalize the power dynamics within the process.

Using this model will take some work initially, anything new does. We believe it has the potential to do more than be a tool for better critique, but will challenge all of us on our power relationships and help us develop an increased sense of responsibility to one another and our work. This model is a work in progress and we expect it to evolve over time.

It is not our goal to come to a common answer, but we do want to raise questions about the relevance of our own political work. We hope that the use of the model will create closer relationships between people and will heighten our understanding of what we consider to be useful ways to analyze and critique our own projects as well as those of others. This will help us create the projects that will move us forward in the direction we want.

The model of critique in this pamphlet grew out of a class taught as a part of the Matchbook Learning Project. The Matchbook Learning Project is a school based on anarchist principles. We see the school as a way to make revolutionary change in this society, and to build a stronger and more vibrant anarchist community that struggles against established power while simultaneously envisioning and building a new way of life.

Underlying Assumptions

Ground Rules

o Responders have enough respect for the work and/or the people involved to want it to succeed.
o Both the presenters and responders are there to learn from the process.
o All people involved will not be equal in experience, but are there as peers and so do not speak from a position of authority.
o Presenters should have control over the feedback they receive.
o In every part of the process equal responsibility is held by the person asking a question (so it can be heard), and the person hearing it (even if it is hard).
o It is debatable whether all critique is subjective or whether there is an objective perspective anyone has access to. For the purpose of the process it is more useful to see one's thoughts as opinions instead of as facts.

These underlying assumptions form the boundaries within which this process functions. If anyone involved cannot follow the above it will be more useful to either withdraw from the process or change the process itself.

This process was designed to critique a shared experience.

Terms:

o Presenters—The people presenting their work for critique.
o Responders—The people providing that critique.
o Facilitator—A moderator who keeps the process flowing and calls abuses of the process.

Step One

Go over model, process and underlying assumptions.

Step Two

For situations that are not based on a shared experience.

Presenter gives background information. Presenter defines scope by drawing attention to a couple of areas where they want specific feedback. If critiquing a shared experience, go directly to step three. Before moving on, facilitator restates the questions asked by presenter.

Step Three—Affirmation

Goal: This step should challenge the responders to articulate why they think the work is worth the time it will take to critique. Also, it is important to everyone to know that their work is valued by someone else.

Tactic: Responders give positive feedback. Comments should highlight specific aspects of the work that honestly touched you. Facilitator should help keep comments specific.

Example—your use of ___ when doing outreach was ___. Your choice of ___ was very thoughtful.

Step Four—Self Critique

Goal: Responders get a sense of the presenter's underlying assumptions, and their ability to analyze their own work.

Tactic: Presenter starts with a brief self-critique that reveals their own questions and struggles with their work. The presenter then asks questions of the responders that concentrate

on those areas. The self-critique and the questions should be focused, and specific. It is best for the presenter to prepare for this ahead of time. Before moving on, facilitator restates the questions asked by presenter. Responders are encouraged to ask questions that clarify the areas already highlighted by presenter. Facilitators should help keep both parties focused and precise.

Example—I am working on ___. How did that go? We had difficulty choosing between these things. What do you think of our choice?

Step Five—Probing Questions

Goal: Responders get information about the work beyond what was presented earlier. Presenter examines their work beyond their own questions and possibly comes to some new conclusions. Facilitators need to keep questions on track.

This is a peer based process; the questions should not be phrased as coming from a position of authority. The responders need to be genuinely interested in the presenter's process, and less attached to their own specific critique. The point is for something new to be revealed to the presenter, not that the presenter come to the same conclusion as the responder asking the question.

Tactic: Responders as questioners. Responders form their opinions into probing questions. The questions should help the presenter analyze their work further and get information that was not previously covered.

Example: I wonder if this event really accomplished ___. In your critique, you said _____. It is not clear me how...

Step Six—Opinions and Suggestions

Goal: The purpose of this model and this step is to improve the work that the presenter is doing.

Tactic: Responders state opinions that challenge the work. Before stating an opinion the responder checks with the presenter. The responder can choose to hear the opinion, or not to hear it at all, or to hear it at another time. Most opinions are easier to hear if they are accompanied by a suggestion for how to improve the work. Opinions that devalue that kind of work altogether are not useful.

Since we see ourselves as peers, it is most useful to see our opinions as such and not as fact. This step requires a lot of trust; the check-in exists so the presenter can retain some control.

Example—I have an idea on how you could have done better outreach. Do you want to hear it?

Step Seven—Check out with Facilitator

Goal: To provide a safe space for presenter to respond after the section with the most direct criticism. If the criticism is contentious or harsh, this can lead to bad feelings. It is therefore mandatory that the facilitator check in with the presenter(s) after the whole thing is done.

Tactic: This is a private check out between just the facilitator and the presenter(s).

notes from the matchbook learning project

In the fall of 2005, the Matchbook Learning Project held a class which developed this model of critique. For a short class we learned a lot, and hope that we have begun a new tradition of positive, constructive, effective and supportive political critique in our community.

We hope you can take it and use it in the much needed activity of giving and receiving feedback on the political work we are doing. We as a community will benefit from the introduction of this model. As a new tool in our political kit, its presence reminds us to keep in mind the